

Proposal Regarding Belgic Confession Article 14

Introduction

The Bible alone is the infallible and inerrant authority in the Canadian Reformed Churches. We have always maintained that the Confessions are subordinate standards – they faithfully summarize biblical teaching, but they are not on the same level as Scripture. The Scriptures are divine in origin and thus cannot be added to or taken away from. However, the Confessions are human documents bearing ecclesiastical authority. They can be amended or edited to better conform to the Scriptures or to address new challenges. As an example, we can note changes that were made to Belgic Confession article 36 at General Synod 1905 of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. A number of words were deleted in an effort to better conform to biblical teaching on the role of civil government.

The Canadian Reformed Churches presently face a significant doctrinal challenge in the area of origins. As this proposal will demonstrate, arguments have been made publically to promote theistic evolution and allow it to be taught. By theistic evolution, we mean the teaching that God created the world and all organisms over billions of years. Many theistic evolutionists, including some within the Canadian Reformed Churches, also teach that Adam was not the special and direct creation of God. Rather, while acknowledging that Adam was a historical figure, they teach that he was the descendant of pre-existing hominids (man-like creatures with an evolutionary history) that was, at some point and in some ill-defined way, chosen by God to be endowed with his image.

While an argument could be made that our confessions in their existing state address this teaching, others have publically asserted that the confessions leave room for diversity of opinion on such matters. Since this teaching already exists in our churches and has been successfully gaining adherents, it appears that our confessions in their existing state are not sufficiently guarding our churches against this false teaching. To maintain the truth of Scripture, the churches would be well-served by adding some words to Belgic Confession article 14. These few words should settle the question clearly of whether theistic evolution may be taught or maintained in the Canadian Reformed Churches.

Proposal

We propose that Synod adopt the following text for Belgic Confession article 14 to clarify our confessional and biblical stance on human origins (new wording underlined):

We believe that God created the human race by making and forming Adam from dust (Gen. 2:7) and Eve from Adam's side (Gen.2:21-22). They were created as the first two humans and the biological ancestors of all other humans. There were no pre-Adamites, whether human or hominid. God made and formed Adam after his own image...[the rest of the text remains as currently adopted.]

Grounds

1. Theistic evolution is being publically taught or promoted by some members within the Canadian Reformed Churches. We will supply two separate examples of individuals doing so.
 - a. In a comment on a blog post, Dr. Arnold Sikkema (formerly an elder in the Langley Canadian Reformed Church) wrote, "It's about as clear that evolution is an affront to God as gravity or weather."¹ The original blog post was a report by a seminary student of some classroom lectures by Dr. J. Van Vliet. In these lectures, Dr. Van Vliet taught that theistic evolution compromises some attributes of God. In his blog comment, Dr. Sikkema was taking issue with this assertion. Dr. Sikkema is also an editor and founder of Reformed Academic, a blog which has promoted theistic evolution and tolerance for it in the Canadian Reformed Churches (see below). He is noted on Patrick Franklin's list of "Prominent Christians who support evolution."² By evolution, Franklin means "biologically, Homo Sapiens evolved through natural processes from ancestral forms in common with primates." Dr. Sikkema recently contributed a chapter to a book entitled *Foundations of Education: A Christian Vision*. In this chapter he explains that he rejects evolutionism – a worldview which embraces evolutionary processes that exclude God altogether.³ Dr. Sikkema rejects atheistic evolution, however he accepts evolution as the explanation for most of *what* happened and *how* it happened, while God can be pointed to as the explanation for *why* it happened and as the ultimate cause of it all.⁴ Finally, Dr. Sikkema is currently the president of the Canadian Scientific and Christian Affiliation, an organization which promotes theistic evolution.⁵
 - b. Dr. Jitse Van der Meer (formerly an elder in the Ancaster Canadian Reformed Church) is also an editor and founder of the Reformed Academic blog. Dr. Van der Meer spoke at a conference sponsored by Biologos in October 2013. At this conference, "Van der Meer, who is a team member in the ForumC BioLogos project, discussed his own transition from young earth creationist to a position accepting an evolving creation in the 1990s."⁶ On the Reformed Academic blog he writes,

¹ Source: <http://sixteenseasons.wordpress.com/2014/12/04/evolution-and-the-gallery-of-glory/>

² The title of this blog post: "Devout Christians that Acknowledge the Strength of the Evidence in Favour of Evolution." Source: <http://patrickfranklin.wordpress.com/2014/05/21/devout-christians-who-affirm-evolution/>

³ Arnold Sikkema, "Religion and the Science Classroom," in *Foundations of Education: A Christian Vision*, ed. Matthew Etherington (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2014), 69.

⁴ Ibid, 68-69.

⁵ For example, CSCA together with the American Scientific Affiliation publishes a journal entitled *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith*. This journal includes articles advocating for theistic evolution. As one example see Patrick Franklin, "Understanding the Beginning in Light of the End: Eschatological Reflections on Making Theological Sense of Evolution," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 66, no. 3 (Sept. 2014): 154-70.

⁶ Source: <http://biologos.org/blog/from-babel-to-understanding>

When we say that Jesus had a human nature, the word 'nature' means among others that in his humanity Jesus is the perfect image of the Father. Thus with respect to all that is included in being created in the image of God, Jesus did not share his nature with a common ancestor of humans and chimpanzees because Adam and Eve were the first humans created in the image of God. But Jesus is also truly human in his material body and in that respect he like the rest of us shared in this common ancestry.⁷

Dr. Van der Meer also wrote the following:

Fourthly, there is the irreversible hierarchical structure of the classification of living things. If animals living today would have been created by fiat creation rather than by evolutionary creation, there would have been no hierarchical branching pattern unless the Creator would have wanted those who investigate such matters to believe there had been a history which never actually occurred. Since the Creator does not deceive us I am led to the conclusion that He created animals by means of an evolutionary process thereby giving us a real evolutionary history.

[...]

Fifthly, there are anatomical similarities between body parts with different functions such as the human hand and the bird wing. This can be explained by common descent and modification (comparative anatomy).⁸

Elsewhere on the Reformed Academic blog, Dr. Van der Meer is clearly identified as one of several Christian scholars who “lend[s] credence to the theory of common ancestry.”⁹ According to one dictionary definition, “to lend credence” means “to support the believability of” something.¹⁰ All the figures mentioned by Reformed Academic (including Dr. Van der Meer) are associated with Biologos, an organization whose core commitments include the following: “We affirm evolutionary creation, recognizing God as Creator of all life over billions of years.”¹¹

The editors at Reformed Academic have insisted that they have no agenda to create room for theistic evolution in the Canadian Reformed Churches. Instead, they say, they

⁷ Source: <http://reformedacademic.blogspot.ca/2009/04/made-from-dust-of-ground.html>

⁸ Source: <http://reformedacademic.blogspot.ca/2012/11/vanderMeer-responds-to-vanBarneveld-re-Bavinck.html>

These statements were made by Dr. Van der Meer in comments on January 2 and January 10, 2013.

⁹ Source: <http://reformedacademic.blogspot.ca/2010/04/response-to-ten-reasons-1.html>

¹⁰ *Oxford Canadian Dictionary of Current English* (Don Mills: Oxford UP, 2005), sub “credence.”

¹¹ Source: <http://biologos.org/about> Dr. Francis Collins was the founder of Biologos; Dr. Denis Lamoureux is a Biologos blog contributor; Dr. Denis Alexander is on the Advisory Council of Biologos and is also a blog contributor. We noted above that Dr. Van der Meer is a team member of the ForumC Biologos Project.

only want to have room to discuss the issues surrounding the theory.¹² However, in fact, they also want room for those who conclude that the theory is persuasive and the best explanation available of origins. The truth of this is evident when the Reformed Academic collaborators make the following statements (underlining added for emphasis):

37. Many who have been gifted and called to study and serve in the field of biology (or even geology or astronomy), and who are fully committed to the Reformed faith, have difficulty discussing openly in the church community what they are discovering about the way the world is. These brothers and sisters raise challenging questions, but they can be encouraged that there are also answers being given within the broader community of the Reformed faith by those who give careful attention to the interpretation of Scripture and of the scientific evidence. Suggesting instead that entertaining any support for the biological theory of evolution puts them outside of the Reformed community is not serving them, or Christ, well.

38. This argument assumes that God-directed evolution excludes the direct creation of Adam by God. But God-directed evolution does not exclude the direct creation of Adam, because everything that happens is under God's direct control. Therefore, theistic evolution is not outside the boundaries of the TFU.

39. We at *Reformed Academic* all affirm all of these points.¹³

It is disingenuous to suggest that this project does not endeavour to allow this teaching to become a permissible view in our churches.

That theistic evolution is being tolerated in our churches is evident from the fact that to date there have been no **public** sanctions for any of the individuals teaching it.

2. Theistic evolution is one of the most serious doctrinal challenges facing the church of Christ in our current day. It contradicts the teaching of Scripture in several places.
 - a. In Genesis 2:7 we read, "...then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature."¹⁴ Theistic evolutionists, also in the Canadian Reformed Churches, argue that the meaning of "dust" is not clear.¹⁵ Therefore, they say, the door is open to blending "scientific insights" with Scripture, arguing that

¹² See, for example, this blog post: <http://reformedacademic.blogspot.ca/2009/04/on-theistic-evolution.html>

¹³ Source: <http://reformedacademic.blogspot.ca/2010/04/response-to-ten-reasons-10.html>

¹⁴ For recent explanations of this verse from within our churches, see Peter H. Holtvluwer, *Foundations: Sermons on Genesis 1-3* (Tintern: Little Angels Press, 2010), 61-71; Wes Bredenhof, *God did say! Challenging the Wisdom of this Age* (Lynden: Reformed Perspective Books, 2014), 33-48.

¹⁵ See, for example, <http://reformedacademic.blogspot.ca/2010/04/response-to-ten-reasons-1.html>

Adam could have been born from hominid parents, rather than formed from literal dust. However, this contradicts Luke 3:38, namely that Adam was “the son of God.” This plainly means that Adam had his existence directly from God without the involvement of any other creatures, hominid or otherwise.

- b. In Genesis 2:8 we read, “And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed.” These words also plainly indicate that Adam was created by God from the dust. Contrary to what theistic evolution asserts, Adam did not exist as a creature prior to the events related in Genesis 2:7.
 - c. In Genesis 2:16-17 God commands Adam, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” These words presume that death was not part of the prior experience of Adam – as a threat, death is introduced here as something new. However, theistic evolutionists maintain that there were millions of years of death leading up to Adam and Eve. These things cannot be reasonably reconciled.
 - d. In Matthew 19:4 our Lord Jesus said, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female...?” In this passage and the following verses, our Saviour indicates that he regarded Adam and Eve as the first male and female. The male and female genders have their origins at the beginning and, after having been created for one another, it was at the beginning that they were joined in marriage by God himself. This contradicts theistic evolution’s claim that there were millions of years of male and female creatures involved in an evolutionary development leading to Adam and Eve.
3. It is also a dangerous error which threatens the gospel of Jesus Christ. The following examples will illustrate this point:
- a. The gospel in Romans 5 depends on the historical and literal character of the events described in Genesis 2:7. Paul insists that death came through the sin of Adam when he says in Romans 5:12, “Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin...” Previously Adam and Eve had not experienced death, but now it came upon them and their descendants because of sin. In verse 17, Paul then draws a comparison with the second Adam, Jesus Christ. Through the second Adam comes life. However, this powerful gospel illustration is eviscerated with the theistic evolution narrative. If death did not really come through the first Adam, then how can life really come through the Second Adam?
 - b. The gospel in 1 Corinthians 15 depends on the historical and literal character of Genesis 2:7. Paul compares the first Adam and the second Adam. He takes Genesis 2:7 at face value. He says that the first man was from the dust of the earth and, at the moment he was created by God, “he became a living being.” The second man came from heaven. We are descended from Adam, so we are like him – created from dust. But as we believe in Christ, we take on his glorious

likeness. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:49, “And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven.” If Adam was not literally created from dust by a special creative act of God, then we also have no sure hope of glorification in Christ.

- c. The gospel teaches us that our salvation depends upon many miraculous salvation events, such as the virginal conception by the Holy Spirit, the resurrection of Christ, etc. However, when theistic evolutionists re-interpret the miraculous events of creation in Genesis 1 as well as the particular miraculous creation of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2, they introduce a new hermeneutic. This hermeneutic derives from and leads to theological liberalism and, when consistently followed, entirely destroys the gospel.
- d. The gospel has almost always been compromised by those who have embraced theistic evolution. As one example, one could consult D. G. Hart and John R. Muether’s history of Presbyterianism, particularly as regards the Presbyterian Church in the USA.¹⁶ In fact, prominent theistic evolutionists argue that drastic changes to the gospel itself must necessarily follow this teaching. They regard these changes to be entailed as necessary consequences of embracing theistic evolution (thus we deny that we are advancing a slippery slope argument). For instance, retired CRC minister Edwin Walhout has noted how an acceptance of theistic evolution must lead to revisions throughout one’s theology. For instance, he argues that theistic evolution must lead to the rejection of the doctrine of original sin and a reconfiguration of our Christology.¹⁷ For another example, one may note the recent book of Peter Enns, *The Evolution of Adam*.¹⁸ In this book Enns argues that “evolution...cannot simply be grafted onto evangelical Christian faith.” Instead, it necessarily requires a synthesis which includes modifications of how Christians understand not only origins, but also sin and death. In relation to sin, he argues that it must lead to a revision of Christian ethics. If you accept theistic evolution, “sexual promiscuity to perpetuate one’s gene pool” needs to be understood as a means of securing survival. In relation to death, “death is not the unnatural state introduced by a disobedient couple in a primordial garden.” Instead, death is an ally of evolution. It assures continued evolution and also sustainable population numbers. Though Scripture states otherwise in 1 Cor. 15:26, Enns asserts, “Death is not the enemy to be defeated.”¹⁹ Based on the foregoing, we are confident in stating that, if it is carried through to its logical conclusion, theistic evolution must lead to a denial of the gospel of salvation.

¹⁶ See D.G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Seeking a Better Country: 300 Years of American Presbyterianism* (Phillipsburg: P & R, 2007), 178-181.

¹⁷ See his arguments here: <http://www.thebanner.org/features/2013/05/tomorrow-s-theology>

¹⁸ Note that Enns was suspended from his professorship at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia in 2008 for writings that challenged the inspiration of Scripture. He went on to work at BioLogos, but his contract with them was not renewed in 2011. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Enns

¹⁹ Peter Enns, *The Evolution of Adam: What the Bible Does and Doesn’t Say About Human Origins* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2012), 147.

We believe that these most serious and fundamental errors must be addressed by the church in an official way.

4. This error did not exist in the time when the original Belgic Confession was written and could not be foreseen as being a challenge for the church today. While the statement “God created man of dust from the ground” was originally understood to mean a special and direct creation, today the possibility remains that these words can be interpreted differently.²⁰ In fact, it already has been proposed that these words can be understood in a variety of ways, including some that can be reconciled with theistic evolution.²¹ In our situation, we must take what was originally implicit and make it obvious and explicit. We may also note that the error of evolution is not of recent vintage. It and versions of theistic evolution have now existed for over 150 years. Its longevity suggests that the churches have come to the point where a clear refutation is advisable.
5. In the history leading up to the Liberation of 1944, the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands adopted binding formulas regarding baptism and the covenant of grace. These formulas clearly went beyond what is required in Scripture and their binding nature contributed to the Liberation. Because of this history with unscriptural binding, we in the Canadian Reformed Churches have been averse to adopting position papers or making other doctrinally binding statements. However, in our proposal, the position being set forward is most clearly established by the express words of Scripture (see Ground 2 above) and required as a ground for several other express teachings of Scripture (see Ground 3 above). Therefore, this proposal does not impose any unscriptural binding. It simply makes clear that we stand with the express teaching of Scripture.
6. In the Canadian Reformed Churches, doctrinal breaches have typically been dealt with on a case-by-case basis. However, because these issues are often dealt with as discipline matters at assemblies in closed session, the judgments rendered have no public standing for the churches – they are decisions typically known only to the parties involved. Even if they did have a public standing, it might be argued that the judgment only pertains to that one case. The nature of this error requires an official public response that applies across the board.

²⁰ Outside of the Belgic Confession, we do not have any extant statements from Guido de Brès about the creation of man. However, we do know that de Brès was heavily influenced by John Calvin. Calvin’s commentary on Genesis 2:7 is clear. Calvin maintains that Adam’s “dead body was formed out of the dust of the earth.” See Calvin, *Commentary Upon the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 112. Samuel Maresius wrote one of the first commentaries on the Confession. In his commentary on article 14, he follows the traditional understanding offered by Calvin and others. See Maresius, *Foederatum Belgium Orthodoxum* (Groningen: Joannes Nicolaus, 1652). Moreover, by the time of Maresius, we do find scholars propagating the existence of pre-Adamites. Maresius himself wrote a detailed biblical response to this false teaching. See Maresius, *Refutatio Fabulae Prae-Adamiticae* (Groningen: Frans Bronchorst, 1656).

²¹ See Dr. Jitse Van der Meer’s arguments here: <http://reformedacademic.blogspot.ca/2009/04/made-from-dust-of-ground.html>

7. Appointing a study committee on this question allows time for this false teaching to continue being propagated in our churches. This error has already been given too much time and space to grow. Official ecclesiastical action is urgently needed.
8. There is historical precedent for this type of proposal in our heritage. We can mention three examples.
 - a. Prior to the Synod of Dort 1618-19, the doctrine of the imputation of the active obedience of Christ was being undermined and denied by some in the Reformed Church in the Netherlands. The Synod of Dort made an addition to Belgic Confession article 22 to clearly state this doctrine as part of the faith we confess.²²
 - b. In 1693, a classis of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands adopted the Walloon (or Walcheren) Articles.²³ These articles consisted of further explanations of some points of doctrine found in the Three Forms of Unity. They were in force until 1816. Ministers were required to subscribe these articles and they materially functioned as a fourth confession in the churches. Therefore, the idea of putting forward a further explanation of the confessions (with a binding character in the churches) is not unknown in our history.
 - c. We already noted in our introduction the deletion of significant phrases in article 36 of the Belgic Confession in 1905 in the Netherlands. Deleted were the words, “all idolatry and false worship may be removed and prevented, the kingdom of antichrist may be destroyed.”
9. In 2001, our closest sister-church in North America officially decided that theistic evolution is contrary to Scripture. The United Reformed Churches decided at Synod Escondido that they “reject any evolutionary teaching, including theistic evolution, concerning the origin of the earth and of all creatures.”²⁴ Over the years, the Canadian Reformed Churches have expressed concerns about the tolerance of the Framework Hypothesis²⁵ in the United Reformed Churches.²⁶ Deputies have repeatedly been mandated by our synods to indicate our concern that the United Reformed Churches allow for interpretations of Genesis (like the Framework Hypothesis) which make room for an old earth. We share that concern. Meanwhile, our federation is facing the teaching of theistic evolution, something not permitted in the United Reformed

²² For the details, see Nicolaas H. Gootjes, *The Belgic Confession: Its History and Sources* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 151-152.

²³ See P. Biesterveld and H.H. Kuyper, *Kerkelijke Handboekje...* (Kampen: J. H. Bos, 1905), 319-332.

²⁴ Article 43 of *The Minutes of the Fourth Synod of the United Reformed Churches of North America*.

²⁵ This interpretation of Genesis 1-2 sees the days as a literary framework. According to the Framework Hypothesis, the days are not intended to be understood as six ordinary days.

²⁶ See, for instance, article 98 of *Acts of Synod Chatham 2004*. The deputies of the unity committee were mandated to discuss this concern with their URCNA counterparts. The matter comes up again at subsequent CanRC synods (e.g. see article 98 of *Acts of Synod Smithers 2007* and article 63 of *Acts of Synod Burlington 2010*).

Churches. It is incongruous for us to have our concerns about the Framework Hypothesis in the URC whilst we tolerate the teaching of theistic evolution in our own churches.

10. Biologos is a major force promoting theistic evolution in North America. Biologos recently received nearly nine million dollars in grant money from the Templeton Foundation.²⁷ Well-funded, Biologos will continue to attempt to influence Reformed and Presbyterian churches throughout our continent. We need to anticipate the effects of this, also in our own churches.

Process

1. This proposal was adopted unanimously by the Council of Providence Canadian Reformed Church on January 26, 2015.
2. It is hereby forwarded to Classis Ontario West March 11, 2015 for consideration, per Church Order article 30.
3. If this Classis Ontario West is agreeable, it is then forwarded to the next Regional Synod East.
4. If the next Regional Synod East is agreeable, it is then forwarded to Synod 2016 for consideration and, if agreeable, adoption.
5. According to the Rules for Ecclesiastical Fellowship, major changes in our confessions require discussion and consultation with our sister churches. We believe that this proposed change is a clarification, rather than a major change. However, if Synod 2016 believes that this is a major change, the adoption can only be provisional. In such case, Synod 2016 would mandate our ecumenical relations committees to communicate our proposed change to our sister churches and solicit feedback for Synod 2019. With that feedback in hand, a final decision could be rendered at Synod 2019.

Conclusion

We fully recognize that this proposal is extraordinary, at least in our own immediate history as Canadian Reformed Churches. However, we are firmly convinced that the challenge before us is a threat so dire that it calls for action of this momentous nature. As office bearers in Christ's church we have sincerely committed ourselves to opposing, refuting, and preventing doctrinal errors. Our prayer is that the Canadian Reformed Churches will officially recognize that theistic evolution is a false teaching which threatens the gospel of Jesus Christ.

²⁷ Daniel James Devine, "Interpretive Dance," *World*, November 24, 2014. Available online here: <https://www.worldmag.com/mobile/article.php?id=32175>